

INTERVIEW WITH CARLA SIMÓN

RECIPIENT OF THE 2019 EURIMAGES
CO-PRODUCTION DEVELOPMENT AWARD
RECIPIENT OF THE 2018 NIPKOW SCHOLARSHIP
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“Alcarràs” is Barcelona-based Carla Simón’s second feature in development for which she received the Co-production Development Award in Berlin, also taking part in the Torino ScriptLab, Nipkow Programme and Cannes Residency. A family drama, the story takes place in Alcarràs, a small town in deepest Catalonia, where the large Solé family cultivates a great expanse of land full of peach trees. One day they wake up to some bad news. The owner of the land they have cultivated for generations has recently died and his son and heir wants them to abandon their farming business so he can turn the land into fields of solar panels. The whole Solé family – children and adults – get together to harvest their peaches for one last summer. This comes after Simón directed Summer 1993 (2017), her autobiographical debut which won many awards including the Best First Feature Award and the Grand Prix of the Generation Kplus International Jury at the Berlinale, along with three Goya awards, including Best New Director.

CONGRATULATIONS FOR YOUR EXTREMELY SUCCESSFUL FILM “SUMMER 1993”. THE TWO YOUNG STARS AGED THREE AND SIX ARE INCREDIBLE. HOW DOES

IT WORK TO HAVE SUCH SMALL CHILDREN ACT ACCORDING TO A SCRIPT?

Neither of them ever read the script. I don’t believe they were very conscious of what they were doing. For them it was a game and all of us were playing in it. We were trying to build intimacy between them, the adults and this family we were portraying, by spending a lot of time together. We improvised moments that would have happened before the events of the film so we could build the story between the characters and they would understand their relationships. Yet they did not understand the relationships in a rational way. They would simply play and feel. We did often rehearse and go to each location together before shooting. I also talked to them all the time during the takes and told them what they had to say. The important aspect is that you find children that really want to do it and have fun with it. And Laia and Paula did. I could tell that they loved it. They wouldn’t mind repeating scenes again because they were having so much fun and we would find something new each time. If you find children like that, then sometimes it is even easier than with adults because they are not so self-conscious and you can guide them more easily. Of course, it was not easy, but

when I finished the film, I knew I wanted to keep working with children.

FOR YOUR NEXT PROJECT, YOU HAVE CHOSEN TO WORK WITH NON-ACTORS COMING FROM YOUR HOMETOWN ALCARRÀS, WITH THEIR SPECIFIC ACCENT AND REAL ATTACHMENT TO THE LAND. WHY IS THAT?

The characters in the film are mainly farmers, especially the men, and I feel it is important that the cast is able to do this job authentically in front of the camera. We will also check which actors in Catalonia are from Alcarràs and see if any of them can join the cast. In this region, many families work in agriculture or have learnt to do so, passed on from one generation to the next. I would also like to find real siblings, real couples, or real fathers and sons to embody this family unit. We would like to find people who have a relationship in real life and already know each other. I believe their special bond would develop on camera. We are currently trying to find people near Alcarràs who want to act and are interesting in terms of looks – faces are very important to me.



“Alcarràs”

I AM AWARE THIS WILL BE AN ENSEMBLE FILM AS YOU WANT TO EXPLORE THE CINEMATIC WAY TO EXPRESS WHAT IT IS TO BE PART OF A HUGE FAMILY. WHAT IS A HAPPY FAMILY FOR YOU?

A happy family is complicated. It is formed by those you trust so much you can share all the good and bad moments with them. When I am having a hard time, as long as I feel that I have my family’s support, I am happy. A happy family feels united. I think it is also very cultural: in Spain, the family is a big, important institution. Perhaps this is because we usually have a lot of women in one family and women place a lot of importance on sticking together.

SPEAKING ABOUT WOMEN, WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THE SAYING THAT FEMALE DIRECTORS OFTEN FIND IT HARD TO BALANCE THEIR CAREER AND PERSONAL LIVES?

I think about this a lot. I don’t have kids yet, but I would like to eventually. I talk about it a lot with my friends. Actually, I had a crazy dream about this. In the dream, I was in the street with a paper in my hand with an address. I was trying to find this address and I realised that it was the kindergarten for my daughter, who was three. But I couldn’t remember her name because I was working all the time! When I woke up, I realised I was really worried about that. To make films you have to work a lot, and when you think about how to do that with a family, it is complicated. At the same time, many women seem to manage. Maybe it slows them down for a bit, but they keep making films. I love children and I want to keep talking about childhood in my art. Therefore, for me, there is no option where I will not try to create a family, however complicated it is.

STRANGE, MY LAST QUESTION ON MY LIST WAS TO ASK WHAT YOU DREAM OF, WHICH IS A QUESTION I DON’T OFTEN ASK.

The dreams I have are very revealing. Not too long ago, I dreamt that I had made a film that I could not remember shooting. And in the dream, the film had already been released and my producer came to me and said, “Carla, no one is watching your film. It is not going well. But don’t worry you’ll make another one”. And I woke up thinking, “Oh no, I made a film I don’t remember making and no one is watching it!” (Laughs) I also have happy dreams, but my fears are very clear in my dreams.

IN 2016 YOU DIRECTED THE MOVING SHORT FILM “LLACUNES”, A PERSONAL PROJECT AS A PART OF THE RESEARCH FOR “SUMMER 1993”, BASED ON YOUR MOTHER’S LETTERS. HOW DO YOU STRIKE A BALANCE BETWEEN FINDING THE RIGHT DISTANCE WHILE REMAINING ENGAGED WHEN DIRECTING SUCH DEEPLY INTIMATE PROJECTS?

It is hard to find the right distance. With “Summer 1993”, the distance came from the fact that this story happened when I was six. I had been telling my story for so many years that it eventually felt like it didn’t

happen to me. Of course, I was close to the story while I was writing the script. Writing is the most intimate, personal and introspective moment for me, where I try to connect myself and be very honest with how I feel. However, when we started casting and doing pre-production, it was somehow not my story anymore. Then it again became personal when we released the film. During all the interviews, I couldn't hide that this was my story.

DO YOU THINK THIS WILL APPLY TO YOUR NEXT PROJECT "ALCARRÀS"?

With this next film, I think it will be slightly different because it is my family's story. I was more of an outsider, more of a spectator. It gives you a lot of energy when you feel that the story you are telling is important for you. For me, it is crucial to have this connection, because it creates a mystical or hidden energy that shows on screen. "Summer 1993" was sort of a miracle because, despite it being difficult to make, I kept on fighting for it, it was all that mattered to me at the time. When you have a story that you really want to tell, you have an energy that sort of drags you and leads you, and you just go with it because you feel it. It is crucial that I really feel the story. Right now, I still have a big family and so I still have many more intimate stories to share! *(Laughs)*

DO YOU EVER WORRY ABOUT WHAT YOUR FAMILY WILL THINK OF YOUR FILMS?

No, as I share the process with them. They read all the drafts of the script for "Summer 1993". My parents also live in the area where we were shooting and they came very often. My sister is an actress and she is in the film, and my brother made the music for the film. So it isn't just my film, it is our film. It is also an excuse to spend more time with them and create something together. Now, with this next script, it is much the same. My mother has read it because it is her family and I wanted to make sure that she is okay with everything that is in there. There is more fiction in this film than there was in "Summer 1993". She has read it and she calls me sometimes because she remembers something that I can maybe include in the script. My uncles haven't read it yet because I want to perfect the storyline before they read it. Altogether, it

is a shared process. I would never do it if they did not want me to do it. I am more afraid whenever my films are shown in front of an external audience.

WHAT ARE YOU MOST EXCITED ABOUT WHEN BEGINNING PRODUCTION?

I'm interested in capturing the life of a big family and all the little moments that happen at the same time – people moving in the same space and dialogues happening at the same time. It is hard to describe it because it is still at a very early stage. Because it will be an ensemble film, there will be no particular point of view. The story is not told through one character. In "Summer 1993" the camera was operating from the girl's point of view, showing what the girl was feeling and seeing. In this next film, I think that I will have more freedom as to where to place the camera. I know I want many people in the frame all the time. I want to try to play with layering, both in terms of depth of image and in terms of the dialogues and background sounds.



Shooting "Alcarràs"

YOU SEEM TO HARNESS A LOVE STORY WITH THE CATALAN LANDSCAPE. HOW ARE YOU GOING TO APPROACH THE VISUAL IMAGERY IN ALCARRÀS?

The desire to make this film also comes from observing for so long this very flat landscape that is Alcarràs. You have all these fields, forming nature, yet nature built by humans. Many judge it to be not so pretty, while I find it very cinematic. It is not wild nature, as it was in "Summer 1993", where we were in the mountains. The fact that the landscape is really flat makes the light very interesting. It gives way to all these over-

sized sunsets and sunrises. The peach trees are also important because they are an image that I have had in my mind since I was a child. The visuals will have something similar to “Summer 1993” in the sense of being a sort of home video, because this is how I relate to my family.

I’VE HAD THE PLEASURE TO RECENTLY INTERVIEW CATALAN DIRECTOR NEUS BALLÚS. WHY DO YOU THINK THERE SEEMS TO BE A DISTINCT YOUNG GENERATION OF PRIMARILY FEMALE CATALAN FILMMAKERS THAT ARE EMERGING DESPITE A COMPETITIVE GLOBAL MARKET?

When I was at university, I did not know any older female filmmakers or have any female friends making films. It was very important for me when Mar Coll released “Three Days with the Family”. I saw this film while still studying and I remember thinking: “Wow, this is possible”. She was Catalan, female and making her first film while still young. We then became friends



“Alcarràs”

after meeting in a script writing lab, where she gave me a lot of feedback for “Summer 1993”. The more references you have, the more possible you feel it is to become a filmmaker. My references have not been older filmmakers, rather my friends who are making films right now. I talk to them when I have doubts or I want to share my process. We meet very often and share actors and editors. I think the more women you see that are making films, the more there is room to help each other. The fact that our films are travelling internationally also helps and the script labs are very important. Another thing our films have in common is that the stories we tell are often very personal. There is a sense of naturalism in working with the actors for

many of us, but not all of us. I don’t know if this has something to do with the fact that we all live in this part of the world. I don’t know. *(Laughs)*

WHY DID YOU APPLY TO THE NIPKOW RESIDENCY?

I applied very early, at the beginning of the writing process because I realized it was very hard for me to write from Barcelona. I had many interviews and press requests with my film “Summer 1993”. I thought if I could isolate myself and be in a different city I would be able to focus more.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU ONCE THERE?

Because the premise of the film is inspired by my family, it was good to spend time with them and then go to Berlin to just focus on the writing. I was inspired by being able to be with myself and not have anything on my agenda. I also felt greatly inspired by the city (Berlin) itself.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM THE EXPERIENCE?

What was really good is to have tutors to read your work. I had sessions with one tutor and to have someone give you feedback when you feel lost is key. You are not alone basically. Even if I am writing the script with a friend of mine, we are so much into it, we lose perspective. To have someone read your material and give detailed reflected feedback on what you’ve done is extremely valuable.

HOW DID WINNING THE EURIMAGES CO-PRODUCTION DEVELOPMENT AWARD MAKE YOU FEEL?

It was incredible because I was not expecting it at all. There were other really good projects and I thought we were very lucky to receive such an award by Eurimages. It boosted my confidence with the project itself. I previously thought that maybe the reason I was accepted into this programme is because of my film “Summer 1993” being a success. It made me realize they picked the project for the project itself. It gave me this huge push to keep going with what I am trying to do with this film. It also made me feel that Berlin is my lucky city, because each time I go, I experience something amazing.